

"CONSUMER ACCEPTANCE OF IRRADIATED PRODUCE"

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A few years ago, a small group of anti-technology activists descended on Central Florida for the purpose of creating uncertainty in the minds of citizens regarding food irradiation. People knowledgeable about the process recognized its benefits, but the media gave extensive news coverage to the activists, thus promoting confusion over food safety and irradiation plant safety.

But an ABC-TV "20/20" story entitled "The Power of Fear" set the record straight. It exposed the unethical methods used by the anti-scientific opposition, who advocate that we should all return to growing our own food in our own backyards.

The public is increasingly demanding food irradiation. Research is constantly discovering new reasons for irradiating foods. Proponents point out that health care costs can be reduced by tens of millions of dollars each year. Those concerned about world hunger say it is the single most significant development to help the world feed itself. Others suggest it can reduce the need for post-harvest chemicals in foods. It can replace methyl bromide as a quarantine treatment on fruit imports and exports. Irradiation can also boost international trade, since it slows maturation of climacteric fruits to allow shipping-sensitive chilled produce by sea. Modified atmosphere combined with irradiation extends the market life of produce such as strawberries.

Educating consumers about irradiated foods has cost enormous time and money. But adequate information to make them aware of its benefits is the key to success. Universities, the IFT, the Department of Agriculture and its cooperative extension services have all contributed to this educational program. The Public Health Service endorsed irradiation last fall. Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy recently testified that irradiation should be a tool to help solve food safety problems.

The recent loss of life due to contaminated meat has again focused attention on food safety. Today, 52 percent of our meals are prepared in food service kitchens, which are not always as sanitary as they should be. The proliferation of value-added food products increases contamination risks through increased handling. "Cold spots" in microwave cooking raise the risk of serious illness right in our own homes.

Consumers today want to know more about their food. Scientists can measure pathogens more precisely. Government can better identify and track outbreaks of food-related disease. All of this points to the need for a technological revolution in the handling of our food.

Now is the time for food companies to break down their wall of silence and join in the benefits, for themselves and consumers. Surveys show that 85 percent of consumers will buy irradiated foods now or are willing to try them, given more information.

This is an impressive beginning. The time for timidity is over.